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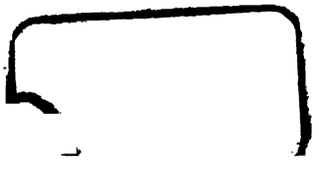

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The Mirror of the East.

By ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE.

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Langdon Warner

The Mirror of the East.

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE CONTEMPORARY CLUB,

DAVENPORT, IOWA,

April 13, 1911.

—BY—

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE.

THE CONTEMPORARY CLUB,
DAVENPORT, IOWA,
1911.

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THE MIRROR OF THE EAST.*

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE.

Unless one has had a special reason for studying it, the art of the Far East is more than likely to be to one a wholly unexplored and rather uninviting labyrinth. Into this labyrinth, without many preliminaries, we are now to venture; and the conductor of the expedition begs the suspension of his fellow-travellers' judgment as to the madness of the undertaking until we shall have made our safe return. To the explorer, Eastern art offers many buried treasures of interest and of beauty. And as our connection with the other half of the world becomes daily closer, the desirability grows of a greater familiarity with the modes of thought and aims of life which the East cherishes. Probably no Caucasian is competent to report to us this vast complex of mind and custom as a whole. But certain glimpses and side-lights are less difficult to come at; and nowhere so well as in the art of these regions—an art which is, as a rule, infinitely closer to the life of the people than is our art, and infinitely more expressive of the racial personality. Here, amid much that is strange and a few things that seem grotesque, are to be gained flashes of extraordinary beauty and vivid revelation, which may almost be said to hold up for us the mirror of the East.

Of this art, one small but rich corner is to occupy us tonight—the field of the old color-prints for which Japan has gained so great a fame in every land where art is known at all. The popularity of these prints has grown slowly, however; for they are based on a set of artistic ideals and conventions different from those to which Western nations are accustomed; and their strangeness has to be mastered before their charm can be appreciated. The Japanese artist cares, for instance, very little about the anatomy of the human form; he will shorten or lengthen it at his pleasure, if thereby he can the better express the quality of massive strength

*Read before the Contemporary Club April 13, 1911.

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in man or delicate fragility in woman. If his subject happens to be an actor in some great and tragic role, he will not hesitate to prolong the lines of the drapery unconscionably, to give the effect of solemn dignity, slow movement, and monumental isolation. We may smile at the distortion of such a figure; but we must acknowledge that an atmosphere of lofty and special destiny surrounds the form, exactly because of these devices. With just such a purpose, the Greeks put thick-soled buskins and painted masks on their actors, to make them unrealistic and superhuman, the fit agencies for a drama of ideal conceptions. Fictions of a similar nature are used in all our arts today: but we have grown so used to them that we do not notice them as fictions. The Japanese artist has a whole store of them that are new to us. To indicate streaks of low-lying mist, he will draw into his picture a spot with scalloped edges, and color it with any shade that suits his general color-scheme; disdaining to copy nature more servilly. For his aim is not to reflect nature, but to create, let us say, the image of a proud and slender girl who, on a spring morning, moves slowly and musingly through a world perfectly composed to form a decorative pattern around her. Every line is purposed, every color calculated to serve the total effect of the composition. All else is subordinated to the idea and the design. And the same is true in the delineation of pure landscape. The artist will represent trees by a blotch of green and cliffs by a patch of red, both in tones never seen in nature, if by these short-hand symbols he can suggest simply a frame or setting within which to express, like a poetic vision, the rising of a twilight moon out of pale waters into a pale and mysterious sky. He would take no interest in painting nature as it literally is, or as the camera reproduces it; it is the human quality, the feeling or the associations awakened in the mind by nature, that he tries to perpetuate. Hence Japanese art is, in one sense of the term, the most intellectual that we know. And because of such a quality, one might properly describe the landscape we have been considering, not as "a picture of the misty moon rising under the bridge of a river," but rather as "a picture of how a great artist felt as he saw the misty moon rising."

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II.

The color-prints with which we are now concerned constitute a special development or offshoot of painting proper. They are, strictly speaking, not paintings at all, but wood-engravings in color, or impressions taken on paper from a series of charged blocks of wood. The method of procedure was simple but exacting. First the artist drew his picture on a sheet of thin paper, which was then pasted on a slab of cherry-wood and all but the outlines cut away by the knife of the engraver. From this key-block, a few copies of the outline were printed; and with the aid of these as guides, a series of wood-blocks was engraved, each one of the blocks bearing in relief only such parts of the whole picture as were to be given the same single color. Then, by carefully applying the various tints to the various blocks, and pressing these successively in exact register on a sheet of paper, all the colors were brought together in their proper relative positions, and the color-print resulted. The success of the process and the beauty of the final product depended upon three elements:—the composition of the original design, the accuracy of the woodcutting, and the handling of the colors on the blocks. If crude colors were used, the print would be spoiled; and we often find that impressions taken from the identical blocks may differ enormously in beauty. One can get for a few cents poor copies of certain prints whose value in fine impressions might mount into hundreds of dollars.

These color-prints, which are today preserved in the portfolios of collectors and museums, were in their inception things of very plebean origin. Most of them were issued as popular broadsheets, sold at a very low price, for circulation among the humblest classes. They served to depict, for the populace, famous actors or professional beauties, current legends or noted landscapes, very much as our theatrical handbills and picture post-cards do today; most of them were trivial and unvalued things, passed from hand to hand or pasted by the careless owner on the screen that stood before the kitchen fire. It is as easy to imagine Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan gathering together a collection of modern valentines as it is to conceive of a great Japanese collector or art-lover of that time

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giving a moment's serious consideration to these toys of the vulgar herd. The ordinary copies which we find nowadays show only too plainly by their damaged, sometimes almost obliterated condition, how little they were originally prized. It throws an astonishing light upon the art-instinct of the Japanese people when we see that their commonest and most trival picture-sheets, tossed off for a copper to be within a few years lost or destroyed, have in them qualities so rare that artists and students now pore over them as over cabalistic documents in which lie hidden some of the profoundest secrets of art.

III.

Though the landscape-prints have, as a rule, more charm for foreigners than have the figures, the figure prints, being of the earlier origin, must, for the sake of orderly arrangement, occupy our attention first. Such a consideration takes us back to the year 1743, from which the art of color-printing may be said to date. Previous to that time, wood-cuts had been known only in black-and-white, printed from a single block. Sometimes color was applied to such pictures with a brush, and very pleasing effects often resulted; but real color-printing was not yet in existence. For pure grace of line, however, some of these black-and-white or hand-colored prints are unsurpassable. The achievements of our best modern workers in black-and-white seem like a series of crude blotches and stumbling pen-strokes by the side of these consumate sweeping curves. But with the year 1743 came the new development of the art which was to eclipse all previous attempts with the fresh resources of the true color-print. At first the number of colors in use was limited to two or three, generally green, rose, and yellow. Some of the earliest attempts may seem crude to us, though we must admit their vigor. But in the short space of a few years—before the last quarter of the Eighteenth century had begun—we find the colors have broken away from all limitations of number, and that the artists are bringing them together in combinations of the utmost softness and beauty. Among the greatest names of this period are Harunobu and Shunsho—great names in the universal history of art. Many of Harunobu's prints

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depict, with a peculiar refinement, the life of the young Japanese girl; while Shunsho achieved fame by his vigorous prints of actors, moving with grandeur in the roles of an Eastern Hamlet or Macbeth. For the connoisseur, no prints exceed in facination the product of these years. There is a wonderful delicacy about these colors and an unerring sense of adjustment in their relation that makes each print a harmonized whole, mellow and satisfying. Age has done something toward this effect, but not, I think, very much. Artists tell us that there has never been, in any art, more skillful handling of color than this. The pale grays and browns and reds blend with each other to a degree which is likely to escape, at first sight, the careless Western eye, accustomed to more glaring combinations. But the grace of line and the flexibility of pose cannot be overlooked by anyone; we know nothing like it, except possibly in the handling of drapery in certain archaic Greek statues. Every fold of these gowns is a curve of beauty, like a bending willow or a poising wave.

An indescribable delicacy and purity of manner clothes, as with clear light, these girl-figures of Harunobu's. Like the figures of Botticelli, they seem to poise and move in an atmosphere of more rarefied loveliness than anything we know in reality. Half of their charm lies in this unreal and unhuman impression; they are not Japanese women, or any women, but living fairy-tales, butterfly creatures out of nowhere.

Shunsho, however, is impressive because of another kind of genius. His actors have, not the unreality of perfect grace, but the intensified reality of exaggerated power and dignity. His figures in repose are like statues, in their arrested movement; in action, they have the vigor of those natural forces, such as waves and river-currents, which often form their backgrounds.

The culmination and fullest development of the color-print may be seen one step farther along, in the last quarter of the Eighteenth century. Possibly one misses the simplicity of the earlier masters; but one finds a rich and well-rounded effect that compensates. The tendency toward exaggerations of form diminishes; the grace and dignity of the figure is unmarred by mannerisms; the composition

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grows more varied; and the picture takes on that comprehensiveness of detail which the Western eye prefers. The name of Kiyonaga is synonymous with this period. He and his followers were the first to make a practice of painting their figures in real space, filling up the whole surface of the print with the delineation of the scene which surrounds the figures, instead of leaving them isolated and without a background, as the earlier painters did. The earlier men occupy the same relative place that the school of Giotto does in Italian art; these men are of the age of Raphael.

The course of every art seems to be a necessary sequence of preparation, growth, culmination, and decay; and such is the story here. We have seen the preparation in the black-and-white prints of the forerunners; the growth in the actors of Shunsho and the young girls of Harunobu; the full blossoming in the splendid compositions of Kiyonaga; and we may now anticipate the decline. It comes, at first, hardly perceptably, in a softening of vigor and a leaning toward super-refined and exaggerated grace. It is of a delicately morbid and luxurious cast, though undeniably magnificent when the artist is of such skill as was Utamaro, the most notable of these end-of-the-century painters. Utamaro spent practically his whole life drawing the courtesans of the Yoshiwara or licensed quarter; and through his prints an endless procession of these graceful and haughty beauties move with imperishable life. No man has ever painted Japanese women with the peculiar quality of charm and romance and exotic fascination that Utamaro created. His courtesans become princesses, moving as with the rhythm of unheard music; every fold of their garments has the emotional suggestion of a love-song. Nothing could throw a clearer or stranger light upon the social position of such women in Utamaro's time than do these pictures, when every beauty, every grace, every refinement is showered upon them, and they shine forth, brilliant and subtle, like the Aspasia of Pericles.

But not long after Utamaro, the decadence turns to decay. We find the composition growing crowded; the colors crude; the inspiration exhausted. And finally, after the middle of the Nineteenth century, in the last phase of all, color-printing declines into hideous tawdriness and goes out in a blaze of truly infernal glory.

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IV.

The landscapes which color-printing produced did not, as a class, come into being until the very end of the Eighteenth century, a time when, as we have seen, the high-water mark of figure-prints was past. But this new development of the art sprang into a new kind of greatness—a genuine renaissance; so that since 1800 it has been the branch worthy of one's chief attention. And, further, it is the phase of color-printing which seems to have by far the largest fascination of all for Western eyes. In the work of two great landscape painters, Hokusai and Hiroshige, we may study it at its best.

That landscape of which we spoke at the beginning of this paper—the misty moon rising under a bridge between the cliffs of a river, is one of Hokusai's notable works. Hokusai has been called the greatest of all Japanese artists; and whether or not one agrees with so broad a statement, one cannot withhold from him a profound admiration. "The world danced in fresh pictures before his vision; and to see for him was to depict" says Professor Fenollosa. There was nothing in the whole range of Japanese life that he did not make the subject of his pictures. He sometimes signed himself "Gwakiojin Hokusai," meaning "Hokusai-mad-with-painting;" and the name is not inapt, since throughout a long life he painted with an unceasing passion of devotion to his art. His composition, his draughtmanship, and his color-schemes are equally novel and fascinating. Among his most famous works is a series of Thirty-six Views of Fujiyama, the sacred mountains of Japan, pictured in all varieties of atmospheric conditions—in sunlight and storm and dusk, across fields or seas or cities. The view-point changes continually; but the great white peak stands alone and unchanging, like a symbol of the Eternal, while about its feet goes on the kaleidescopic mutation and flux of busy human life.

Hokusai's younger contemporary, Hiroshige, goes a step beyond the older painter in the delicacy and poetic charm of his landscapes. He has been called "the painter of rain, snow, and mist," because of the peculiar skill with which he handles such effects.

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But one may go further than this, and say that there is no mood of nature that he does not render with subtle power. This may be seen to advantage in what is perhaps his most famous work—his series of views of the Fifty-three post-stations on the Tokaido Road—the great highway which connected the northern and southern capitals of Old Japan and served as the main artery of communication and travel for the nation. The scenery of these stations Hiroshige depicts with an unerring sense of what we may call the sentiment of a landscape. When he pictures a village street at nightfall, it is with a strangely haunting poetic feeling for the mystery of distance and of that quiet dusk-hour. His conception of a rosy dawn, brightening beyond the snow-covered pines of a steep hillside has in it all the clear, cold bracing rigor of the morning itself; the slanting lines all point restlessly upward; it is like the sound of a trumpet. And, in contrast, was ever silence painted more perfectly than in his picture of a snow-smothered village road at fall of night, where the roofs are heavy with snow and the sky is leaden and lifeless? Or did a spring wind ever blow with more visible gustiness across rice-fields than does that which fills with stir another of these vivid scenes?

Thus with inimitable picturesqueness, Hiroshige depicts the life and scenery and scenic atmosphere of the great Tokaido Road. There seems no end to the variety of novel vistas which he lays before us. The best known and most prized of all is the astonishing print in which he paints the rain and wind, the beaten tree tops and hurrying travellers of the Shono Pass. But this representation of the turmoil of the elements is no more perfect than, in its own way, is the calm and brightness of his picture of rose-colored dawn breaking behind a wayside tea-house; and there is an almost richer beauty in his view, beyond rocks and gnarled pine trees, of Fuji, rising white over a green-blue sea. And finally, in his design of a sandy peninsula beyond which the wooded mainland lifts like a ghost in the mist, we see at its subtlest this man's unapproachable sensitiveness to the effects of nature.

In the southern part of Japan lies an inland body of water, Lake Biwa, famous for the beauty of its shores. These shores furnish

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Hiroshige the subject for another of his most noted works, his Eight Views of Lake Biwa. Here, in mists of dawn or glow of sunset, in the large meditative light of late afternoon or the limitless floods of magnificent moonlight, he depicts the lake, its white boats, its villages and its encircling mountains with a delicacy such as not even he himself ever surpasses. If one wishes to know whether or not one can appreciate Japanese landscape prints at all, let him look at this Lake Biwa series; it is a touchstone.

Near Lake Biwa lies the great city of Kyoto, formerly the southern capital of Japan. Hiroshige's series of Ten Views of this city and its surroundings are full of a fresh and different interest. Whether he paints the bank of the river where gay revellers are enjoying the early summer evening, or a gorge flaming with the scarlet brilliance of autumn maple trees, or farm-laborers carrying homeward their burdens at the end of day, or straining boatmen under a great moon—he conveys unfailingly the sense of color and life and inexhaustible beauty.

Of the old northern capital, Yedo, now called Tokio, Hiroshige made numerous series of prints. His scenes of evening mist stealing in upon the dark pines of a temple court, or of the golden light of afternoon pouring through young branches, are only surpassed by the unerring composition of his bridge-scenes and the orange glow of his sunsets dying away beyond the canals and the housetops. But some of his upright Yedo pictures, done very late in his life, have an almost greater sureness and power. Three evening pictures are especially noteworthy: the varying dusks of twilight, evening, and the moonlit night are all his to capture here. And never in his youth did he paint snow more brilliantly; or rain more powerfully; or any vision whatsoever more sublime than that of the great black soaring eagle looking down upon the blue waters and the white snow-folded plain. His earlier pictures are lyric; these are epic, heavy and magnificent with the whole weight of a long life of artistic experience.

Hiroshige died in the year 1858. His work was always interesting; sometimes, in such designs as the panel called "The Bow-Shaped Moon," he rose to heights that have been attained by only

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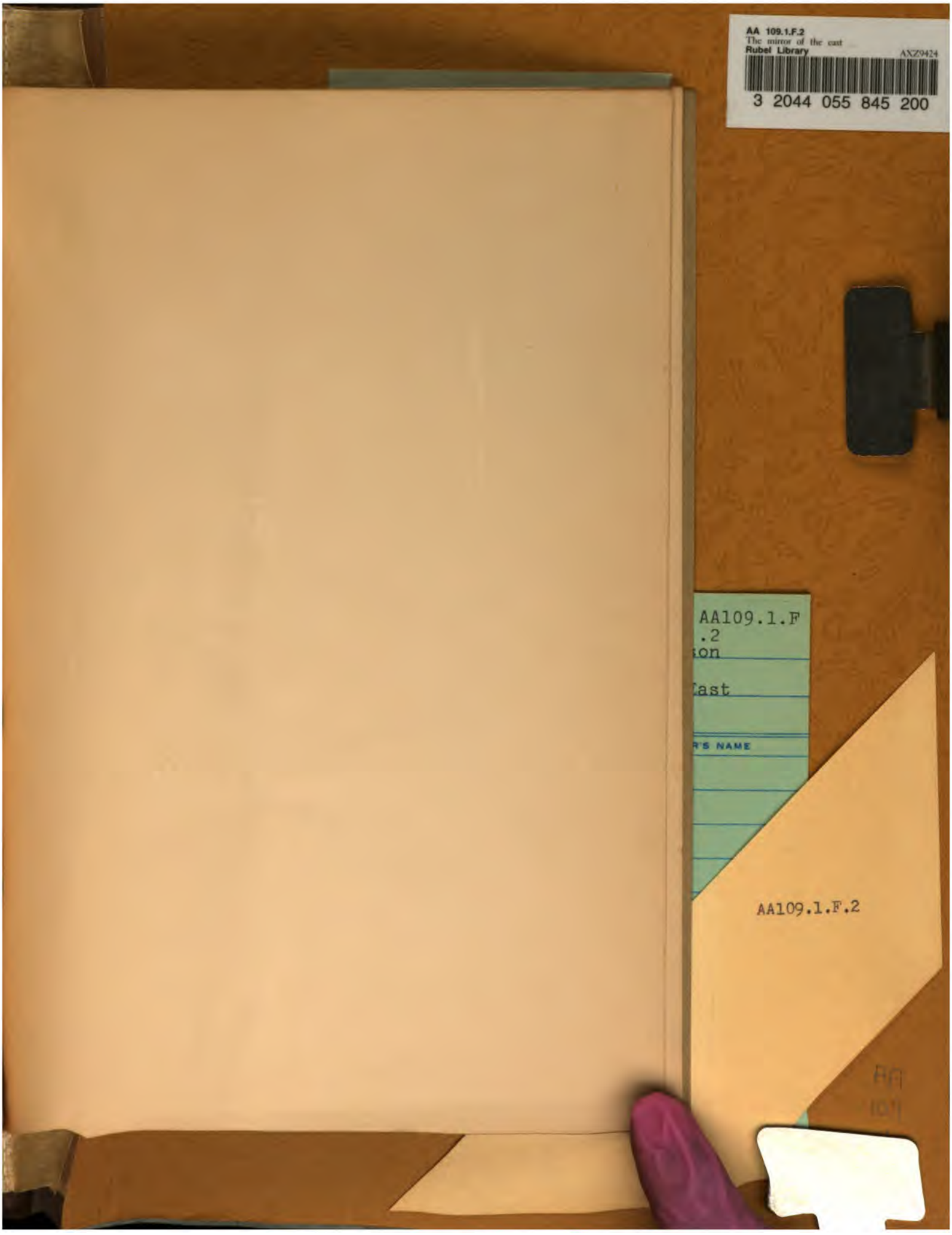
a bare half-dozen artists of any race. A rare memorial portrait of this Turner of Japan, painted by a contemporary artist, bears the curious inscription, supposed to be spoken by the dying painter:

"I, at Azuma, lay aside
My brush, and to far lands repair,—
Regions beyond the Western tide,—
To view the wondrous landscapes there."

Which may perhaps be called dying in the faith of art.

After 1858, the color-print swiftly grew extinct in Japan. No new painter had power to take up the brush dropped by Hiroshige; the art has almost become a lost one; and probably it will never be revived. But these reliques of an older civilization and a purer art occupy a place of ever increasing importance in our study of the Japan of former days and of the art of all time.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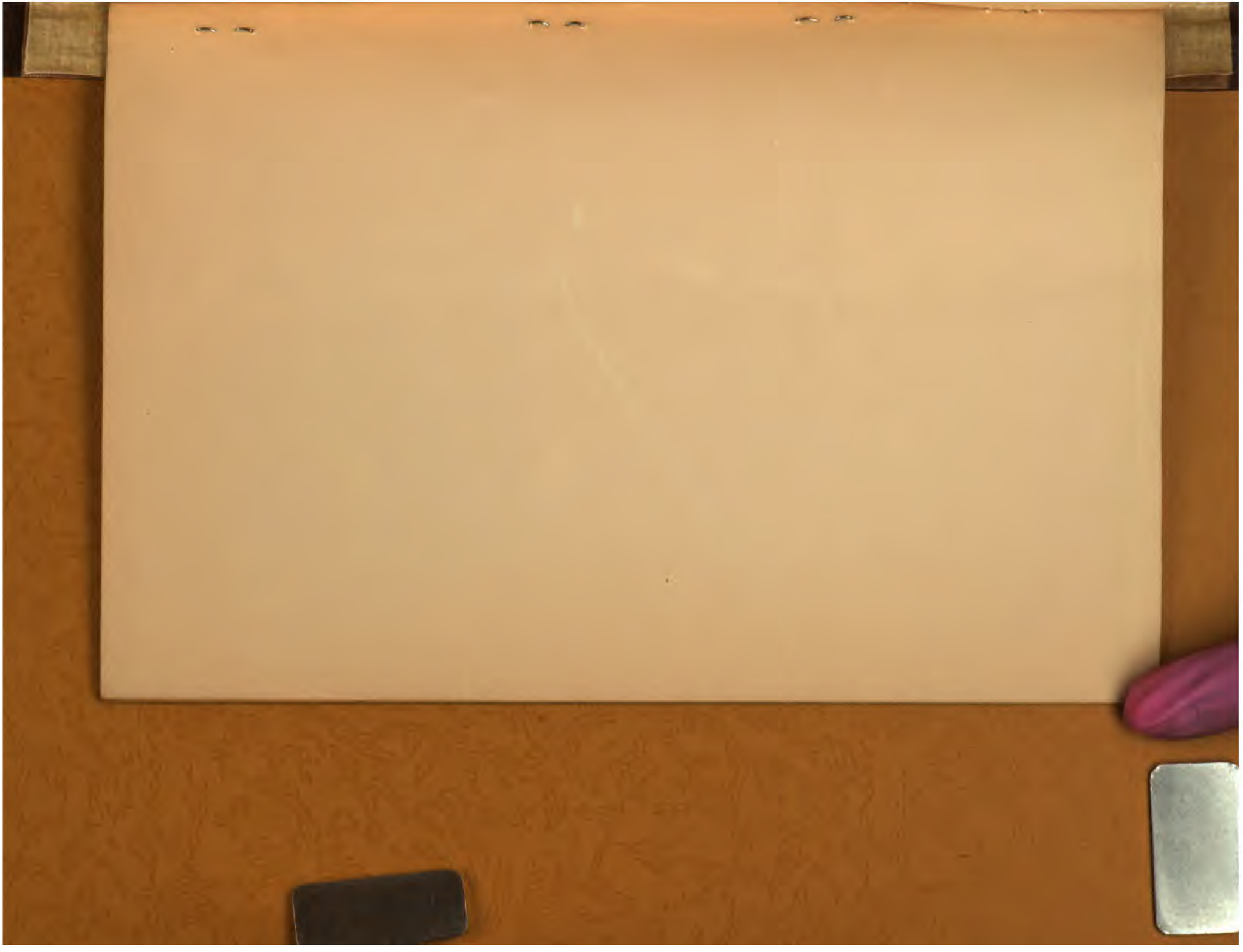

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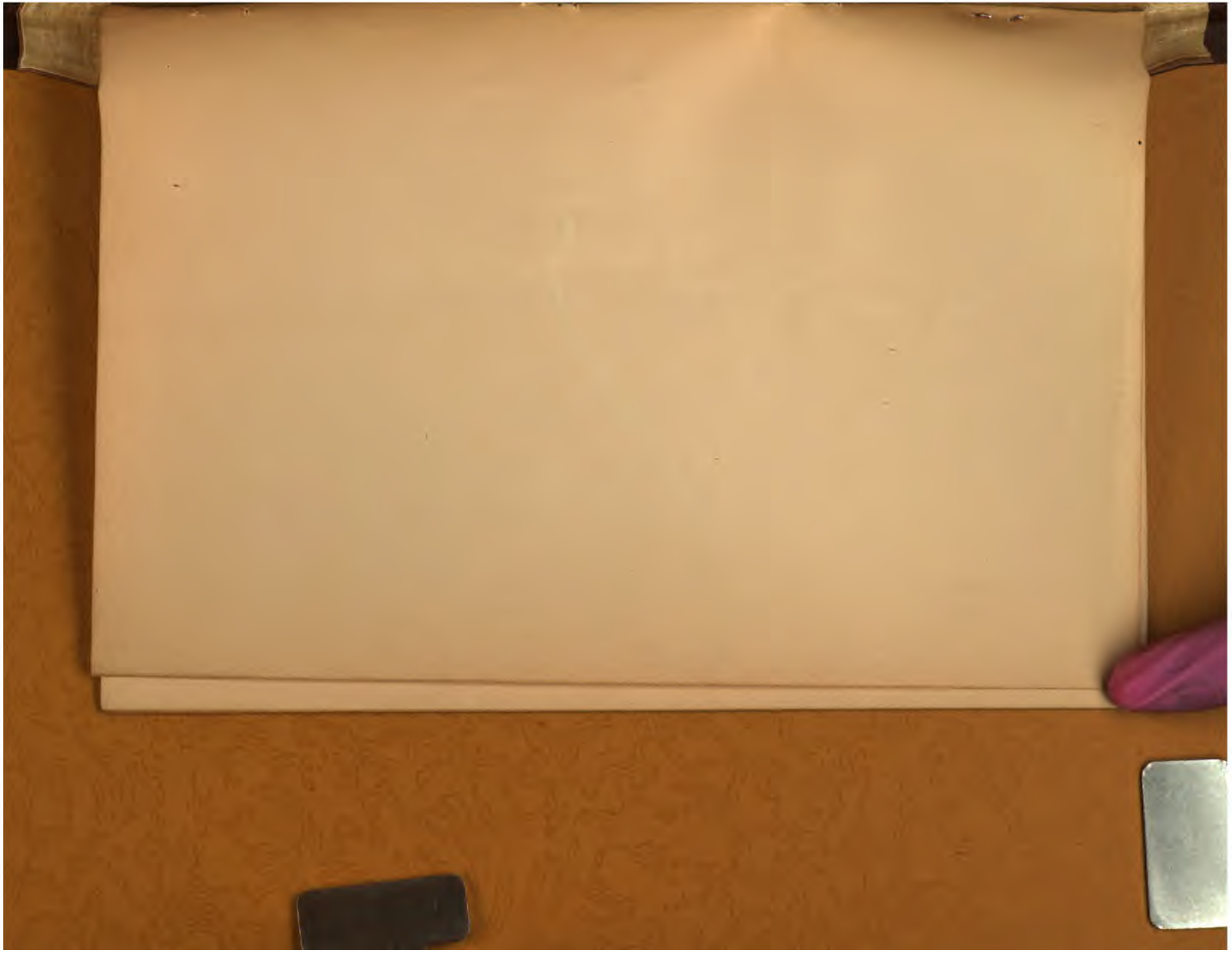

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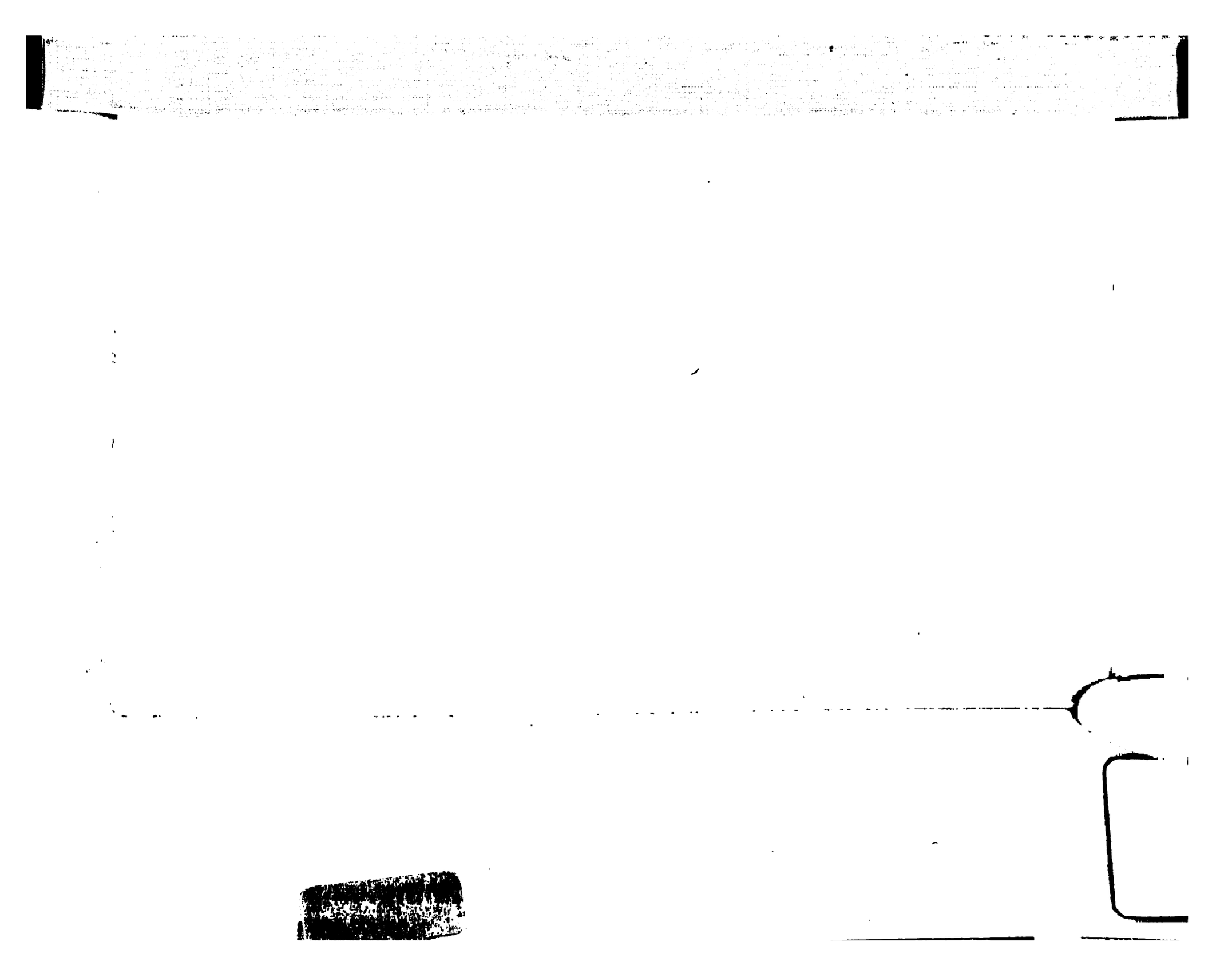

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